



Strategies for Learning: Small Group Activities in American, Japanese, and Swedish Industry
by Robert E. Cole

Review by: Chris Argyris

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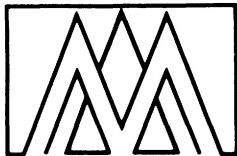
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BOOK REVIEWS

Walter R. Nord
Book Review Editor

Strategies for Learning: Small Group Activities in American, Japanese, and Swedish Industry, by Robert E. Cole. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 354 pp., \$29.95.

Reviewed by Chris Argyris, Graduate Schools of Business and Education, Harvard University, Boston, MA 02163.

Why, asks Cole, did the American firms (during 1960–1985) move more slowly and less effectively in adopting small group activities than did the Swedish and Japanese? The correct answer lies in a confluence of many factors, all within a "macro" approach. In a thorough, systematic, and careful analysis, the author builds a strong case for his perspective.

Cole uses as his overall framework what he calls the standard model of diffusion process. Briefly it is Motivate—Search—Discovery—Transmission—Decision—Implementation. He uses the model to show us why, in three countries, small groups were used in the workplace in order to expand employee autonomy and control, resulting in significantly different consequences.

The analytical journey is organized around models that help to make sense of a myriad of data and can be used to think systematically about the design and implementation of policies around participation and small groups. For example, a model is developed for each country on the "managerial motivations for introducing small-group activities." The models are organized around three basic categories: the driving

forces, the strategic responses, and the objectives. The first two categories appear to imply a causal movement (from driving forces to strategic responses). The third category appears to be the consequences of the first two in the form of the objectives each country intended to achieve.

In the case of Sweden, the driving forces were shortage of labor, rising education, and political pressures for democratization. The strategic responses were capital investment, foreign migrant labor, female labor, offshore facilitators and suppliers, plus small-group activities and decentralization of those efforts. The objectives were improved social, psychological, and physical work environment, productivity and quality improvement, long-term sources of labor, and alternative profit opportunities.

The driving forces in Japan were the labor shortage, internationalization, pollution, and rising education. The strategic responses were primarily capital investment, seasonal labor, part-time labor, and offshore facilities and suppliers. These led to small-group activities and decentralization of such activities. The objectives were communication, teamwork, and motivation; productivity and quality improvement; holding action for maintaining production; flexibility; and alternative profit structure.

The driving forces in the United States were internalization of economy and declining competitive position. The strategic responses were capital investment, offshore facilities, and suppliers that led to small-group activities and decentralization. The objectives were improved worker satisfaction, productivity, quality of the product, and alternative profit opportunities.

Cole concludes that the Swedes tried more

and accomplished less, the Japanese tried less but accomplished more, and the Americans tried less and accomplished less. He attributes these consequences to the national infrastructure created in each country for the diffusion of small-group activities, which he models elegantly (p. 296).

If you are a scholar who wants to learn about strategies for learning (which is the title of the book), I believe you would find many insights into how macro factors are likely to influence or inhibit learning. But, there is no explicit theory or model for strategic learning at the local level, which Cole acknowledges plays a key role if innovations are to diffuse. Put another way, if I were an American who wished to gain more than Americans had done previously, Cole would advise me that I would most likely succeed if I could change the U.S. macro factors to be more like a combination of Japan's and Sweden's. Yet, I believe Cole would argue that it is unlikely that I would be able to bring about such changes. Does this mean that I have little hope of succeeding? If so, why?

By ignoring the micro approach, the author does not focus analytically on the variance in performance of small groups within each country. For example, as a result of my observations with Japanese, Swedish, and American executives, I could identify examples of American plants that were as good or better than the best in the United States and would rank very high when compared with Swedish and Japanese installations.

These "exceptions" are acknowledged by Cole but, given his macro approach, he treats them as residual categories. Cole explains his choice for a macro approach that ignores micro variables because the micro level industrial-organizational psychologists themselves admit that they have not been able to identify important causal patterns.

Another claim that could be made is that the reason there have been so few empirical patterns found at the micro level is that the research methods used primarily by industrial-organiza-

tional psychologists lead to a systematic distancing from empirical reality in such a way that patterns are less likely to be discovered.

I did wonder about the way the concept of learning was treated. I could find no conceptual or operational definition of learning. Perhaps he meant either the standard diffusion process or the models of each country's national infrastructures. What I looked for was Robert Cole's telling us what he learned about learning: the type of learning theory to which he was contributing, how Swedes and American might use it and, indeed, how the Japanese might use it to enhance their own learning.

This is must reading for scholars. Cole shows how to organize knowledge through the use of models that provide meaningful patterns and insight. The practitioners can also benefit from this book if they wish to develop a more thoughtful understanding of small-group activities in the workplace.

Prisoners of Leadership, by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1989, \$19.95, cloth.

Reviewed by Gayle Baugh, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL.

This book, the most recent by Kets de Vries, is an ambitious undertaking that looks at a number of aspects of executive leadership. In the course of 10 chapters, the author attempts to indicate why some executives are successful and others are trapped by their own success. In addition, the author discusses charismatic leadership, dysfunctions in the leader-follower relationship, entrepreneurship, and executive succession.

The basic premise of the book is that a psychodynamic approach to leadership permits one to untangle some of the apparent confusion in the field by viewing leadership from both a surface level and a deeper level. The author